

He Who Hits First, Hits Twice: The Urgent Cinema of Santiago Alvarez

By Travis Wilkerson

The films of Cuban director Santiago Alvarez are inextricably linked to the United States. His first exposure to radical politics came while he worked briefly as an immigrant coal miner in Pennsylvania in the 1940's (with the outbreak of war, he returned to Cuba). And nearly all of his key works concern some matter of American history: the civil rights movement, the wars in South-East Asia, U.S. interventions in the Americas. They exist as a kind of fractured mirror on the last 40 years of American history—a subversive alternate history.

Alvarez didn't produce his first film until he was in his forties. But the indefatigable Cuban director more than compensated for lost time. In a film career that began with the triumph of the Cuban Revolution in 1959, and continued until his death in 1998 at the age of 79, he directed nearly 700 films. Lacking formal training of any sort, Alvarez was tapped to direct the Cuban Film Institute's (ICAIC) newsreel division *Noticiero ICAIC*. Over the next 30 years, he would supervise the production of nearly 1500 weekly newsreels and in the process transform a banal and utilitarian genre into a veritable laboratory of radical innovation.

Working under extremely tight temporal and material constraints, Alvarez became a master of improvisation. He combined the use of limited found materials—archival footage and photographs—with a dynamic graphic sensibility, bold and unexpected music/image pairings, and a highly contemporary use of rapidly paced editing. Fusing the avant-garde with popular culture, he sought to synthesize a filmic style as revolutionary as the changes then sweeping his society. As Alvarez moved from the highly condensed newsreel into longer documentaries, he would only deepen his exploration of radically motivated experimentation.

The resulting films were always political, often didactic. They could be playful or deadly serious. They were borne of rage, bitter irony, and an almost limitless solidarity. They could be raucous or silent, brief or monumental, laconic or verbose. They were prone to tangents, but could be as eloquent as poetry. They never sought perfection. They were never made with posterity in mind. They were made for the here and the now. They showed the world to be forever changing and changeable.

What is striking, even today, is the manner with which they successfully balance goals that we tend to regard as irreconcilable. They were at once highly experimental, yet completely accessible. They were produced by a state-financed collective, yet register an unmistakably personal vision. They were produced without regard to posterity, yet they reverberate with a timeless vitality. They

used every means at their disposal. Frequently, this meant they were made with next to nothing at all. "Give me two photos, music, and a moviola," he said, "and I'll give you a movie." And what a movie it would be.